CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

Graduate Studies News

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Mailing Address: *1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West Montreal, Quebec H3G 1M8*
Location: *2145 Mackay St.*
Telephone: *(514) 848-3800*

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From the Dean's Desk

The Time to Err

Until quite recently, the study towards a Ph.D. degree was a well defined and equally well understood self-contained process. Depending on the discipline concerned, it took our best students holding master's degrees at least three to five years of intensive study to earn this rank. On looking through our records I have discovered that a large number of students take considerably longer than this to complete their doctoral studies.

Whether this time frame is reasonable or excessive depends very much on our view of the educational purpose of a doctoral degree. There was a time, not so long ago, when universities were inviting graduates with master's degrees to join their faculty ranks. Some of these colleagues are still with us today. More recently, a Ph.D. has become a must. Today, extensive "post-doctoral studies" are fast becoming essential for university employment. Where will it all end?

There is a natural progression from the bachelor's to the master's to the Ph.D. in the level of independence and the degree of originality of contributions expected of our students. There is also a stable and broadly-based consensus among academics of what that progression should be. At the doctoral level, we usually expect students to function in loosely structured and only mildly controlled environments that encourage experimentation, involve a fair measure of trial and error, and that force our students to challenge accepted principles. Learning from our mistakes is an integral part of learning. What distinguishes excellent students from average ones is not the number of mistakes they make in the course of charting new areas of research, but the nature of these mistakes and the manner in which they deal with them. The difference is qualitative rather than quantitative.

For a variety of reasons it has now become an almost unchallenged view that graduate studies should become more "focused" and that the periods of exploration and experimentation are too long. N.S.E.R.C. has reduced its funding for our best students from five to four years, master's and doctoral studies combined, and F.C.A.R. is about to follow suit. This decrease causes a major problem for Canadian students because of the very nature of many if not most of our Ph.D. degree programs.

As in many other situations, the Canadian model falls somewhere between the American and European models. American doctoral programs involve more extensive and more controlled course components. Moreover, doctoral theses are usually internal documents. The idea of examiners "external to the university" is foreign to most American graduate schools. European doctoral programs, on the other hand, have only minimal course content. The thesis reigns supreme and so does its public, and sometimes, ruthless defence. In European universities, students are frequently left to fend for themselves from beginning to end. Dedicated thesis supervision is the exception rather than the rule. Nevertheless, the absence of extensive course requirements allows European students the luxury of "focused erring" without undue penalty.

Now that the pressure is mounting for Canadian students to spend less time in graduate schools, we must reexamine our degree programs and their purpose. Most Canadian universities are seriously considering the direct entry option into Ph.D. programs from the bachelor's level. Some universities are also considering a two-stage approach to Ph.D. degrees where successful course work and comprehensive examinations automatically lead to the awarding of a Master of Philosophy degree. A debate on this central issue of Canadian graduate education is in full swing. Since government funding policy has a direct impact on student life, the trend has been set for shorter degree programs. It is up to us to ensure that they are structured sensibly and preserve one of their most precious components, "the time to err".

M. E. Szabo

LOUISE MAYERS – Ph.D. in Religion

"How does the structure of a document give us a clue about the society which produced that document?" That's a question Louise Mayers asks quite often — and one she answers with considerable precision. Mayers, a 1988-89 recipient of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council doctoral fellowship, is presently in her first year of doctoral studies in the Department of Religion. Her area of concentration is Late-Antiquity Judaism, specifically the laws pertaining to women and marriage.

Louise Mayers

The methodology Mayers uses is to compare differences between ancient Jewish and Roman laws which were developed during the same period. The varying nature of the two societies can then be explored through the structure of documents and their influence on those social structures.

Mayers began her university career with a bachelor's degree from Université de Montréal. The eight-year program in "Cours Classiques" included courses in history, philosophy, mathematics, physics and languages. The fluently-bilingual Mayers also reads Latin, Greek, and ancient Hebrew. She proceeded to complete a law degree and five years of being a practising lawyer, concentrating on real estate law, before taking time off to marry and have two children.

Mayers' fascination with Judaism began with a trip to Israel in 1977. "In Israel, I somehow felt I was home," she says. "When I returned to Canada I read everything I could find on Israel and Judaism."

In 1980, with the intention of focusing on Jewish studies somewhere down the road, Mayers began taking Hebrew lessons at the Université de Montréal with former Concordia professor, Jean Ouellette, and then transferred to Concordia where she now studies with Jack Lightstone among others.

For background, Mayers is studying religion and sociology, Greek and Roman culture, and ancient literature. Mayers' area of specialization for her doctorate will continue the work she began with

her master's thesis. Using both modern-day translations and original-language texts, her M.A. thesis compared the ancient Jewish and Roman laws pertaining to marriage, women and divorce. The texts she studied were the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish laws dating about 200 A.D., and the Institutes of Gaius, a collection of Roman laws dating from 160 A.D.

"Simply put," she says, "my master's work documented the differences between these two societies which existed at the same time. Consciously or subconsciously, how you choose to put something down on paper, how you organize things, says something about the society you live in. All you have to do is read the book, without even doing an in-depth analysis, and it is evident that the document reflects the religious organization of a society."

What Mayers discovered were two radically different societal organizations. The laws of the Mishnah were organized in clusters, and can be represented graphically as three concentric circles. The laws of the Institutes of Gaius were organized sequentially, and can be represented graphically as a three-step pyramid with an open bottom. Evidence such as this leads scholars to believe that the writers of the Mishnah were coming from a much more closed, rigid society than the writer of the Institutes of Gaius, which allowed for such things as upward social mobility.

Mayers views the work she has already completed, a study of societal organizations by means of a sociological/anthropolitical study of documents, as the first of three stages. For her doctoral research she would like to investigate the succeeding areas: what 'clues' to history lie in how the elements are clustered together in a document? And at the deepest level, what are the 'fingerprints' hidden in the document's use of words which reveal information about these ancient cultures?

"Concordia is a very good place to carry out this type of research," she says. "The Department of Religion is very liberal and avant-garde. The basic foundations are discussed with an open mind — not just accepted. We approach things with a different spirit than some other universities." Mayers says that religious tracts are examined scientifically, as would any other branch of knowledge. The texts are studied without holiness or sanctity. "Like in a lab, we put the text on the table, analyze it, see how it works."

After completing her doctorate, Mayers plans to continue her research, and maybe teach in the field. "A doctorate is not the ending act of the play," she says, "It's what you need to get to the first act of scholarly work and research."

Elspeth Probyn

ELSPETH PROBYN – Ph.D./S.I.P.

What would the personality-laden "Oprah Winfrey Show" be without Oprah Winfrey? What would it be without those sets, its pattern of taping in advance, the studio and home audiences? These are the kinds of questions asked by Elspeth Probyn, a Ph.D./S.I.P. candidate and part-time teacher in Concordia's Department of Communication Studies.

Probyn studies how the researcher's self, and how the audience's self, affect the media text. Because there is no such thing as pure objectivity, the interpreter affects the interpretation. Along these lines, one of her many papers was an analysis of how Winfrey's own personality affects the subjects on her talk show.

Probyn, who was born in Wales, completed her undergraduate degree at the University of British Columbia before coming to Concordia. She completed the graduate diploma program in communications and a master's degree in media studies before beginning her doctorate, which she plans

to complete this year. She is one of Concordia's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council doctoral fellowship recipients.

Her thesis, which deals with feminist cultural studies, is entitled "The Autobiographical Turn: Uses of the Self in Cultural Theory". In it Probyn studies the shifting concepts of the self in various paradigms of cultural analysis, examining how experience can be validly utilized. Put simply, she studies the uses of autobiography, if and how it's a valuable form of academic research. "In the last couple of decades," she says, "experience has become a disfavoured word in cultural analysis." "But," she continues, "the tide seems to be turning back to that style of research."

As part of her studies, for example, she looks at the uses of personal experiences and anecdotes in academic writing. "Ten years ago," she says, "this was taboo, it was condemned as unacceptable because it wasn't scientific and it wasn't pure research. Now it's becoming more commonplace."

As part of her study on epistemological theories and writings, Probyn is doing a historiography of autobiography as it has been used in terms of communications and gender. She says this is the first step towards doing a more empirical analysis. "Experience is totally culturally based," she continues, "so these autobiographies and experiences and anecdotes reflect our culture."

Probyn keeps very busy. She teaches courses to undergraduate and graduate students in the Department of Communication Studies, including a course entitled Media and Gender which she developed herself. She also publishes articles in scholarly journals, does research, attends and speaks at academic conferences across North America, and at the same time, is completing her thesis.

About the university, she has only praise: "I've been very lucky," she says. "Both my department and Concordia have encouraged me to go to conferences and get published. Concordia has a growing emphasis on graduate students, yet is able to maintain individual student attention. This allows me to sit down and go over my dissertation as each chapter is written, and that one-on-one experience is incredibly worthwhile."

Probyn says the university's location is also a big advantage: "Montreal is a unique place to do graduate work because of the two languages and two cultures. It is potentially the most interesting place to study cultural theory."

Probyn's future plans include a book bringing together the scattered theories on media and gender, as well as a study of Peter Gzowski's popular radio show "Morningside" along the lines of her Oprah Winfrey study. This time she will study the personalities of the show's own staff to see why and how the letters that are read over the air are chosen — once again examining how the self affects the whole.

Probyn has recently been offered a tenure-track position at l'Université de Montréal in the Department of Sociology.

Upcoming Doctoral Examinations

Ah Boon Sim, Ph.D. Economics
Thesis Title: **Bootstrapping Single Equation Regression Models: Some Finite Sample Results**
Examination Date: Friday, June 2, 1989 at 2:00 p.m. in Room H-769, 1455 de Maisonneuve St. W.

Anh Dung Ngo, Ph.D. Mechanical Engineering
Thesis Title: **Effect of Liquid Absorption on Fatigue Behavior of Random Fiber Sheet Molding Compounds**
Examination Date: Monday, June 5, 1989 at 10:00 a.m. in Room H-929-23, 1455 de Maisonneuve St. West.

Premchand S. Nair, Ph.D. Computer Science
Thesis Title: **Optimization of Logic Queries in Knowledge Base Systems**
Examination Date: Tuesday, June 27, 1989 at 10:00 a.m. in Room H-769, 1455 de Maisonneuve St. West.

Excellent standing in U.F.E.

Congratulations to those students from the Diploma in Accountancy for their outstanding results on the most recent Uniform Final Examination. 17 of the 18 first-time writers from Concordia passed the UFE, which represented a 94.4% pass rate — the highest in the province of Quebec.

Editorial Committee Chair: M. E. Szabo
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